

## The Enlarging Family: The Challenge of Theological Education in the CIS\*

*Peter Penner*

### Before and after Perestroika

**T**he Evangelical Christians of Russia and of other Eastern European states have been under continuing severe persecution until recently. First it was the Orthodox Church united with the Tsarist government that initiated the persecution. Thousands ended in Siberian camps, were killed or exiled. The Communist Party later continued the pattern. As recently as the 1980s, the main topics discussed among missions working in Eastern countries were persecution, suffering of believers, and smuggling of Bibles and Christian literature. However, the two decades before and after the 1917 revolution saw a time of extensive and successful evangelism and several attempts for theological education. Beside Pietistic and Mennonite educational institutions which had programs of up to two consecutive years of study, there were several Russian initiatives, the one year study program of Ivan Prochanov in St. Petersburg being the longest. It also functioned for only one year. After that an all encompassing persecution by the Soviet state broke out and no programs for theological education were possible anymore.

Since 1928, the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union in the Soviet Union [and up until Perestroika this name includes most of the Evangelical churches] has had no theological schools in their country for they were not authorized by the government. A few students have been permitted to study at times in England, Germany, or Sweden in Baptist seminaries for a very short time.... Since 1968, a correspondence school of the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union was started in Moscow under the leadership of Rev. A. I. Mitskevich. One hundred students followed these courses each year for studies lasting two years.... Since 1976 day classes are taught in Moscow [these were seminars and not a resident day school]. (A.de Chalandeau, 64)

Bible correspondence courses were also organized by the Baptist, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Catholic churches.

---

*Peter Penner is President/Rektor of St. Petersburg Christian University, Russia.*

*CIS: Commonwealth of Independent States*

A new theological education movement began with Logos, a project initiated by BEE (Biblical Education by Extension). The movement spread into various parts of the former Soviet Union, especially after 1985, through the many study groups organized in congregations. In Germany, under the leadership of Johannes Reimer, the project developed into an officially registered organization called Logos International. At the same time, BEE from its headquarters in Austria, continued to conduct an educational program in Russia similar to one that had already been successful in Romania.

There were clear similarities between the two organizations, BEE and Logos. They both began by using the International Correspondence Institute (ICI) courses: Epistles to the Galatians and Romans. Later courses like Introduction to the New Testament, Introduction to the Old Testament, Jeremiah, and others were added. Furthermore, both organizations sent their teachers under tourist visas into the former Soviet Union to visit study groups, lead seminars and take exams. However, each organization selected their teachers in a different manner. BEE invited primarily North American pastors or teachers from theological seminaries. Logos, on the other hand, preferred to send theologically trained Germans with a Soviet immigrant background. These teachers were able to conduct courses in the Russian language and were familiar with the culture and the circumstances in the Soviet Union.

A new era began with the millennial celebrations of Christianity in Russia in 1988. To begin with, more freedom and possibilities for mass evangelism campaigns were created. Furthermore, a better coordination of TEE (Theological Education by Extension) activities became possible. Regional centers were developed in various locations. Today Bible schools are often found in many of these places. Finally, it was at this time that the first Evangelical theological educational institution was founded in Russia, the Seventh Day Adventists Seminary.

The 1990s are seeing a boom in the formation of theological educational institutions. In June 1992 in their "Strategic Plan," OCI (Overseas Council International) noted that there were only a few schools listed for the whole region of Eastern Europe and the CIS. This is an area with a total population of about 425,934,000. In February 1993, a second OCI evaluation, conducted under the auspices of Peter Deyneka in Moscow mentioned over 100 theological educational institutions currently in operation. Most of these, however, were working either as correspondence and TEE schools, or on the basis of short term courses (seminars). Only very few traditional, residential Bible Schools could be listed.

The best developed school listed in the 1992 report was the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Ossiak, located in Croatia. This school was developed by the West as a Christian education center for all of Eastern Europe. Its goal is to train regional leaders and Bible teachers. However, the continuing war in the former Yugoslavia has cast a shadow upon this hope. The OCI report also noted that other key schools, such as the Christian University of Oradea in Romania and schools in Kiev, Moscow, and St. Petersburg are still in the process of development. Their goals are to train pastors, church planters, evangelists and missionaries.

As to the history of residential Bible Schools in the CIS, that era was begun when in 1990, in the small village of Rodniki (which means “source”) a Bible school was founded. It was located near the city of Belorechensk, in the Krasnodar region, close to the Black Sea. About 40 students were taught during the school’s first year. Lecturers came from the West and, at times, stayed for no more than a week. With the establishment of this residential school, Logos abandoned its earlier concept of TEE for the CIS. In the meantime, BEE has continued to enlarge its network of study groups and today has an estimated 15,000 students.

In 1991, two additional residential schools with a similar college program were started in the Ukraine—the Baptist Seminary in Odessa and the Bible College in Donetsk. Every year the number of new schools is growing. In most cases these schools have strong regional importance and functions. However, schools in Donetsk (earlier in Rovno), St. Petersburg (earlier in Rodniki in the South of Russia), Odessa, and Moscow (Baptist Seminary) are becoming more and more “supraregional” in function (i.e., they extend their influence over the whole of the CIS).

### Contemporary evangelical theological educational institutions

The great number of theological educational institutions in the former Soviet Union at present, most of which them have sprung up in the last 5-7 years, have as their common goal to fill the gap in theological education that developed during more than seventy years of the restrictive Communist regime. These institutions are concerned for churches and their ministry as well as the parachurch missionary activities that need informed and trained personnel in order to be faithful to and effective in the task of extending God’s kingdom. Also they are realizing the necessity of Biblical knowledge and training in ministry for recent and not so recent believers in view of the great influx of sects, non-Christian religions and Eastern as well as Western religious practices. Their task is becoming increasingly difficult due to economic, political and religious factors so that most institutions struggle for survival. Some have united their efforts and cooperate by way of associations, such as the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (EAAA), others connect with schools abroad, still others are independent and “do their own thing.”

Contemporary theological educational institutions in the former Soviet Union can be grouped together in several categories:

1. The first category is comprised of **indigenous schools** that have been created with the help of native and Western resources. The leadership of these schools is partly or fully exercised by native personnel. Usually these are denominational schools that are members of a regional denominational union (federation). Financial resources as well as teaching faculty to a great extent come from the West. The schools usually cooperate with Western groups that have been actively involved in the former Soviet Union before Perestroika, though not neglecting contacts to other agencies.

2. A second group consists of **Western schools that have more or less contextualized their education** to the situation in the country. One of the promi-

nent schools in this category is St. James Bible School (Kiev). The primary goal of these schools is to train Christians for ministry. Often theological education in these schools is designed without consideration of denominational distinctives, not taking into account the 1000 years of Orthodox history and beliefs of the Orthodox church, etc.

3. As there are at least ten **Korean schools** in major cities of Russia alone (some seven in Moscow and three in St. Petersburg) and because their ways of operation present certain distinctives to other schools, a separate category seems justified. The leadership of these schools is in the firm grip of Korean missionaries. They define the direction of the school, teach and also decide where graduates, in whom they have invested scholarship money, will be employed. Relationships to native churches and denominations, as well as among each other, often are weak.

4. Some **larger churches have started their own schools** in their church facilities. These are primarily intended for local church members, but they attract some students from nearby smaller churches as well. Often these schools are not residential schools in the full meaning of the term. They use visiting pastors and teachers from other churches/schools in the CIS as well as from the West. Although somewhat unique, schools started by the Russian Baptist Federation in 12 different regions in Russia could be seen in this category. These one year schools use local church facilities and attract nearby pastors, preachers and church planters who are involved in ministry and who receive this education while continuing their jobs.

5. **Correspondence courses** with or without the support of short term seminars belong to the tradition of **Evangelical education** in the former Soviet Union. Existing well before Perestroika. Today there are many native and Western projects offering theological education by correspondence at various levels. There still exists, for example, the correspondence course of the Baptist Federation out of Moscow. A program in Alma-Aty is open not only to Christians, but to anyone interested in Christianity. One of the most widely known programs is run by BEE. Some of these programs specialize in training church planters and other ministry areas.

6. A separate category is the **liberal arts schools, colleges and universities**. Usually they are integrated in or work in conjunction with state universities. In areas, such as business, languages, etc. they attempt to provide a Christian influence by teaching Biblical ethics and/or other Christian subjects. These schools are mainly Western projects and attract Christians as well as non-Christians.

### **The problem of nomenclature**

The process of founding theological schools in the CIS and naming them reveal diverse reasons and motivations. The important underlying vision is to have one's own school. Often the name of the school indicated the goal toward which the school was planned to develop in future. Or it was an attempt to impress state officials in order to open doors for something in the bureaucratic system. Especially in the first years after Perestroika overbearing and exaggerated names were chosen for what in reality were small beginnings. Partly this was due to ignorance about what perceptions

chosen names may cause in East and West. The naming often occurred in the context of tension between Eastern and Western concepts as the following examples may show.

a) The term “institute” is used in the CIS for an educational institution offering post secondary education with a specialization in one certain area. In the West an institute can be just a research center, as for example the Keston Institute. Therefore, due to the influence from the West, secular institutes, for example language institutes and others, changed their name to university. This way the term “university” was redefined and came to mean any institution of higher education and not only one with departments in many areas of study. There are theological schools like the Open University (an Orthodox independent theological educational institution), Donetsk Christian University (an Evangelical Baptist institution) and the school which I represent, St. Petersburg Christian University, which have chosen their name this way. In the West this has caused misconceptions and schools have had to explain what they mean by using “university.”

b) Names such as “Bible School” and “Bible College” in the CIS often mean a residential school with a one year study program. Sometimes, however, behind this name one discovers just a few courses or a few weeks of seminars. This also causes confusion in the West where a Bible School or College is something more substantial. Such inappropriate usage of the name causes an inflation of its meaning in the CIS.

c) “Seminaries” in the CIS are not necessarily graduate programs like in North America, but due to the influence from Western Europe can denote just a series of lectures (seminars). This term is used in denominational schools, especially among Baptists, to describe a training program for pastors and can include Master’s programs, Bible school programs or some on and off campus classes. Baptists often use the term modeled on the Baptist Seminary in Hamburg, Germany or other Baptist schools in Great Britain.

d) The term “academy” depicts in the CIS the highest level of theological education. If nationals choose this name they indicate that they offer an education on that level or at least intend to do so in future. Western missionaries are confused by the term and suspect some kind of a Church Bible School behind the term or they start a Church Bible School under this name.

It is very important not to apply one’s own understanding of various names when dealing with educational institutions in the East. In order to get to know an institution and to arrive at a proper evaluation, it is more effective to look at and evaluate the actual study program offered. One can also not assume that of degree titles given by institutions, such as B.A., B.Th., M.A., M.Th. and others, have a common meaning. Often these too are used inappropriately and suffer a severe inflation of meaning. When comparing one’s own institution with others, there has been a temptation to upgrade (or inflate) one’s program and degree.

### **Operational aspects at theological educational institutions**

In order to educate, one needs much more than a room and some persons willing to listen to a lecturer. Initially after Perestroika that was often enough. Whenever a guest from the West came, one could easily gather a large number of people who were willing to attend and be educated. During the last several years this attitude has changed enormously. In order to run a training institution one needs qualified faculty, libraries, space and adequate equipment.

**The Library.** Eastern Europe and the CIS have been evangelized not only yesterday and what one finds is not a young church without traditions. Accordingly, there is a large amount of theological literature in the East European languages. For the CIS it is mainly in Russian, though there is some literature in Ukrainian and in other languages.

In St. Petersburg, for example, are opportunities to find theological literature which some schools in the West can only dream about. The situation here is certainly much better than at other locations, but it is not the only oasis in this regard. Where else would you have the chance to arrange an excursion where students and faculty would together visit the city's library and archives and see about one third of those manuscripts that are listed in the Greek New Testament's critical apparatus? There are not many places in the world where one could touch ancient texts and read from original fragments of the *Sinaiticus* or the Old Testament from the *Codex Leningradensis*. At key locations in Russia, especially where the Orthodox Church has conducted theological education through the centuries, one finds extensive libraries, mainly in the area of church history, dogmatics and some exegetical literature, sometimes also liberal commentaries such as Bultmann's exposition of John's Gospel and others.

These materials, however, are sometimes of limited use for Evangelical theological schools. Primarily in the area of theology and exegesis, literature needs to be translated from other languages because national Evangelicals have not yet been able to produce sufficient serious theological literature on their own. There are beginnings, but few.

An important asset for many Eastern European schools in this situation is English theological literature. In order to enable their students to master it, schools invest much time and resources on learning English, time lost for theological subjects. This is certainly a problem which will remain for some time. Libraries of more or less established and known schools in the East will continue to consist of English language theological literature constituting two thirds of the holdings, which students can use during their time of studies, but not necessarily be able to purchase on their own and use during their ministry.

**The Faculty.** Changes in the East toward more openness and the calls for help by Eastern European churches resulted in many from the West offering advice and practical help. Many schools sent their professors to teach for a few weeks at newly

established theological educational institutions, others have encouraged their graduates to consider a teaching ministry in the East for a certain time, again others had already had some connections to the Eastern church from the past and helped in their own ways. It would be very impressive to list the many Evangelical professors from the West that have taught in the East during the past decade. My guess is that it was almost every fifth professor. There would also be a large number of pastors who have been involved in some help for the Eastern Church.

Even today theological education in the East is strongly dependent on help from the West in the area of faculty, lecturers, professors, laity and pastors. The faculty of many young schools consists of 90 percent Western teachers who come on a short-term basis and teach for one to four weeks at the school. A number of teachers have committed themselves for a longer term. These groups of the long as well as short term are comprised of excellent specialists in their fields, but also persons who would not have obtained a teaching post in the West because they are either young and inexperienced, or have already served their term and have been replaced by others, younger and/or better educated. Both experience in the East a confirmation of their gifts and/or their second springtime in theological teaching and in being needed by the Church.

These are the realities in Eastern theological education with which institutions have to cope and under which they often suffer. There are only a very small number of Eastern European Bible teachers, not to mention lecturers and professors, that are available and competent to teach in these institutions. There are also very few institutions of higher learning that are able to train such faculty. Only very few schools have an established faculty that teaches in the language of the country and where classes do not depend on whether the short term professor is able to come or not.

**Administration on the Run.** Administrative tasks in the CIS and in other Eastern European countries are afflicted with many problems. Usually, administration receives little attention and emphasis. Often the leaders of schools and sometimes their policy makers are visionaries and pioneers. Such persons usually do not have an open ear for, and do not spend very much time on tasks needed for serious administration. Especially in the communication process with Eastern European schools this becomes obvious repeatedly when letters remain unanswered, or no adequate filing and archiving systems exist for important materials or sometimes even the financial accounting receives inadequate attention.

Administrative difficulties are compounded by the daily problems of Eastern European countries in general and the state bureaucracy in particular. Nothing is done easily and without complications. One needs approximately five times more time and effort to get things done, if one wants to go the legal way. This is especially true of dealings with officials in city and state government. In addition, almost every week some regulations regarding customs, visa services, registration of persons,



renting agreements, military draft regulations and other laws change so that a school needs a full-time person to deal with questions in these areas alone. Also one needs constant contact to a lawyer who keeps the school administration informed about legal changes so that one does not suddenly discover that a school and its procedures have become illegal. As a result schools have an overextended administrative apparatus if they want to follow all regulations of the country.

### **Attempts at cooperation between Eastern European theological educational institutions**

After a good beginning many schools in the East very soon came to the limits of their capabilities. Little of what leaders of schools were planning to do with money and personnel could be completed. In the area of graduate theological education many schools that tried to introduce it have realized that they were not able to reach the level they were striving for. They could offer only a second quality education because already on the Bachelor level, limitations in the areas of faculty, literature, space, and student preparation were felt.

In most cases schools have started continuing education programs with a primary goal to train national teachers for their own needs. Projects and cooperative ventures with various Western seminaries were initiated. Today most of the Eastern European schools have a “big brother” in the West that is accredited and who offers their students the possibility to gain an accredited graduate or even post graduate degree or at least promises to do so in future. Schools, however, realize that this is only a temporary solution and that it does not always produce the results they were hoping for.

However, after the initial attitude of competition between theological schools there are new attempts to cooperate and to strive together for goals which one is unable to reach alone.

*a. Euro-Asian Graduate Project.* The realization that no school in the CIS was able to offer quality graduate theological education on their own, brought some schools of the former Soviet Union together in the spring of 1994 with the idea to start a joint project of graduate education. Its goal was to offer a Master’s program primarily for those who were involved in some kind of educational ministry (for example teaching at a Bible College) where a Masters degree was a necessity. It was the first project of this kind. In spite of some problems, especially in the area of communication, it went very well and was finished in August of this 1996 with graduation ceremonies in Moscow.

*b. Eastern European School of Theology (EEST).* Though a similar project, it is more encompassing and will hopefully last longer than a one time project. Since October 1994 seven Eastern European theological schools have been working toward the goal of establishing a Masters level education that would meet the needs of the schools concerned. The project is headquartered Budapest, with various majors



offered in suitably. Here also one hopes that we as Eastern European schools do not walk too many paths at once: while creating a mutual program that we still continue to push our own educational projects so as to be able to offer at least something in case the mutual projects do not develop the way or as fast as we would like them to develop. We need to work on a sense of togetherness and realize that only together will we be able to produce something lasting and qualitative.

### **The search for an eastern European educational model**

There are several persons who are working on an analysis of the current situation of theological education in the CIS and who hope to offer some suggestions for its further development. In this process a manifold range of opinions surfaces partly because diverse approaches toward theological education in general are used.

1. One of the serious approaches toward theological education which I consider quite valuable is to analyze the situation of theological training institutions from the perspective of the evangelism and church planting situation. Doctoral candidates working in this direction attempt to look at needs of new believers and recently established churches and provide guidelines as to the study programs needed to prepare graduates of theological schools to be able to work in those situations and meet those needs. Often these attempts lead to similar results observable in Western schools, which challenge educators to develop holistic alternative models of education in contrast to the classical models, models with an emphasis not on teaching certain subjects, but on teaching/training people in an atmosphere of mentoring.

2. Other Western authors who have developed a critical attitude toward classical theological education and hope to prevent Eastern schools from repeating mistakes of the West in the past, move toward a somewhat different direction. Here classical models of the 70s, such as TEE or decentralized theological education, are favored without, however, recognizing that they were not always successful and did not reach their goals even in the countries where they were developed and without considering its problems in a post Communist society. I certainly do not want to devalue the need for such forms of theological education in the CIS—they have already shown their importance and have gained their firm acceptance here. But in the process of recommending alternative education these authors tend to devalue libraries, accreditation, other standards and forms of education and to present them in a negative light. That this will not be understood in the East where correspondence courses were the only form of theological education sanctioned by the Soviet state and are still perceived as a far from adequate form of education, is obvious.

In my personal reflection on an applicable Eastern European educational model several questions arise. Is it really possible to develop a specific Eastern European model for theological education? Looking at the history of Orthodox education one notices that their model developed in a constant, sometimes more positive and at times more negative reflection on theological education as seen in the West. Although by now they have developed their model, to what degree is it automatically applicable to Evangelical theological education? Is there one true model anyway?

Are there one or more specifically Evangelical educational models that have continued throughout centuries, have proven to be adequate and need to be followed?

Personally I would like to utilize several “lenses” in order to analyze and evaluate the current situation of theological education in the CIS in order to come to an understanding of an appropriate and adequate educational model for the time and place in question.

### **1. Biblical background.**

a. God’s overall mission in the world includes education as part of its tasks (Mt. 28:16-20). It is important to evaluate contemporary institutions and their philosophy of education against the background of a holistic approach to missions.

b. Education as such is looked at while a number of biblical terms used in the Bible for education are analyzed and a biblical theology of education is developed.

### **2. Historical background.**

Various theological educational institutions in history, mainly Orthodox schools, which have prepared leaders and workers for the church throughout the centuries in the former Soviet Union shall be analyzed. Current Evangelical educational ventures are seen against the background of their philosophy of education, their goals, methods and study programs.

### **3. Secular concepts of education.**

Concepts of education as used in the former Soviet Union in secular institutions are the third “lens” through which Evangelical schools are observed. Often these concepts are deemed unnecessary and not relevant for theological education. They play a decisive role, however, in the expectations of students and churches.

## **Future perspectives**

Since 1991 the CIS has seen a time of harvest in the area of theological education, a harvest that is increasing year after year. Hundreds of students have completed one year Bible School programs and now occupy positions in the church and fulfil tasks which in the West often would be entrusted only to persons with a Masters degree. Since May 1993 graduates of three to four year Bible College programs are being commissioned to ministry and begin serving the country’s spiritual needs. So far graduations have not exceeded about 20 persons a year. Beginning with May 1996 some hundred graduates of College programs will be prepared to move out into God’s CIS vineyard every year. For the churches in the CIS this means a wonderful springtime of growth and spiritual care.

With the break-in of this new time which, we pray, will by God’s grace continue with no major hindrances, a new time of partnerships to schools outside of Eastern Europe has also become necessary. Young schools of Eastern Europe need a family where they find support and encouragement along their difficult way. The continuation of the educational task of the church has shown itself to be much more difficult than the enthusiastic founders first assumed. How can and should one continue? How can national faculty be trained and integrated? What does a healthy and bal-

anced administration look like? How does one plan for and set up a serious theological library that fits specific needs of a school? The spiritual well-being of students at a theological educational institution is not a given - what are better ways to encourage spiritual development of students and faculty? These and many more questions come up when one looks toward the future.

One substantial aspect that plays a major role in the cooperation (or lack of it) of individual Eastern European schools is the financial and other support of Western churches, schools and mission agencies. Often the reason for tensions in relationships between specific schools is due to a Western supporter whom one or both want to win or keep for support or it is the interests of a third party that dominates the school's decisions. In any case, it cannot be perceived as a normal and natural development that Moscow already has more than twenty theological schools, that there are about ten schools in and around St. Petersburg and Kiev and that still more are being founded in those cities. Instead one should work toward having about two to five schools in a city. This is not only more cost effective, but also can indicate a higher quality of education. Certainly the East Europeans themselves are first called upon to solve these questions, but the West can also do its part to help.

Our schools have just a short history, although even today many volumes could be written about it. We still need many things which experienced schools have developed over decades of their struggle to offer relevant and substantial theological education. So when today, for example, we in the East speak about accreditation, then it is not necessarily a sign of insolence and unrealistic assessment, but it can also mean a vital aspect of survival in a country where politics tomorrow can turn in any possible unexpected direction and this way put a school under immense pressure. The pressure can be connected, for example, to a seemingly secondary problem, such as visa regulations.

We were not in existence yesterday and what will be tomorrow we do not know. But we believe that God even for tomorrow has prepared a time for training for ministry and for the theological educational institutions which He has given us. We do not have the experience many schools outside Eastern Europe have. But, in the same way as they we have received a call to train, a call to fulfil the Great Commandment of teaching. This unites us and as God's servants we can only fulfil the commandment together, with mutual efforts while learning from and with one another for God's glorification.

